Social inequalities and parent involvement in children's education in the early years of school

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Abstract

Strengthening cooperation between schools and parents is critical to improving learning outcomes for children. The chapter focuses on parental engagement in their children's education in the early years of school. It considers issues of social and cultural capital as important to whether, or not, parents are involved in their children's schooling. Analyses of data from a national representative sample of children and their families who participate in *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* are presented. Results indicated that higher family socio-economic position was associated with higher levels of parental involvement and higher expectations about children's future level of education.

Key Words: Parent involvement; Academic achievement; Socio-economic status

Introduction

Family involvement in the education of their children at home and school supports better learning outcomes for children. Across a range of research studies in different national and cultural contexts, higher levels of parental involvement are associated with children's higher achievement and engagement with school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Reynolds & Clements, 2005). While research indicates that there are important links between parenting and children's academic and behavioural competence at school, less is known about the mechanisms by which this occurs. Taylor, Clayton, and Rowley (2004) termed these processes through which parental involvement influences children's learning outcomes as "academic socialisation" (p. 163). Academic socialisation encompasses the variety of parental beliefs, expectations, and behaviours that influence children's school-related development.

Background

Parental involvement with, or on behalf of children, at home or at school encompasses such dimensions as school choice because parents select the educational institutions that their children will attend; participation in school governance and decision-making; involvement in teaching and learning activities in the classroom and at home; conversations with their children on school-related matters; and communications between home and school (Dimock, O'Donoghue, & Robb, 1996). Thus, parent involvement encompasses a broad range of behaviours from participation in school-related activities and events, volunteering in the classroom, helping children with school-related activities at home, as well as talking with other parents about school issues and being a part of the social network of the school or neighbourhood. These latter activities provide connections with others who have a similar role in relation to their children's schooling. Through these actions, parents convey to their children that learning and education are to be valued.

Variations in parental involvement by social address and personal beliefs

The level of involvement that parents have with their children about learning and engagement with school varies considerable in relation to families' socio-economic circumstances (Boethel, 2003). While many parents with lower incomes may value their children's education highly, they are less likely to be involved and may actually resist involvement (Drummond & Stipek, 2004). These parents are more likely to have fewer years of school, negative school experiences, or lack the confidence to be involved. Differences between parents and teachers by ethnic or cultural background also inhibit the extent of parental involvement (Desimone, 1999). Teachers are less likely to know the parents of children who are culturally different from their own background and are more likely to believe that these parents are less interested in their children's schooling (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Children in families who have fewer socio-economic resources or who are from a different ethnic and cultural background than the mainstream culture would benefit most from parental involvement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). However, their parents are more likely to find it difficult to become and remain involved.

Parents who have completed school and hold post-secondary educational qualifications are more likely, as a consequence, to have a higher socio-economic position, as well as a depth of knowledge of educational systems. Schools represent and produce middle-class values and forms of communication (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Teachers are more likely to

communicate effectively with these parents from middle-class backgrounds, with whom they are likely to share similar values and beliefs, while teachers are less likely to communicate with parents who have different cultural and social frames of reference. Schools are biased to represent and to promote more middle-class values and this places many parents at a disadvantage. Thus, these parents are subtly placed in a position which makes them less likely to participate in their children's education.

Greater understanding of the beliefs and expectations that underpin parents' decisions about how they will be involved in their children's schooling is needed. "Parents' own working models of school, a combination of recollections of their own school experiences and their attitudes, values, and beliefs about school, influence parenting involvement (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 164). Negative feelings about schools, but not necessarily about the value of education, may prevent parents from making connections with their children's schools. Parents' personal self efficacy about their ability to help their children succeed at school is important. Parents who believe that they have the knowledge and skills to help their children be successful are more likely to be involved (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Parental involvement through a lens of social and cultural capital

Parents and their children come to the school context with different sets of social resources that may or may not be valued in that context (Coleman, 1988, 1991; Lareau, 1987). In the school setting, middle-class parents are more likely to possess valued cultural knowledge and they also possess "a sense of entitlement" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 42). As these parents establish relationships with a school and its teachers, they gain valuable information about the school's culture, policies and practices. They meet other parents who provide information and insights about the school that inform their own efforts to engage with the school. Through their cultural and social resources, these parents learn the evaluative standards of the school and observe and engage in the role expected of them (Lareau &Weininger, 2003).

Families with greater social and cultural capital tend to be more involved at school because these families are more comfortable with teachers and schools and are more likely to have supportive social networks. These parents can "construct their relationships with the school with more comfort and trust" (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 44). Bourdieu (1977) argued that students with greater levels of valued social and cultural capital fare better at school than students with less valued social and cultural capital. While all individuals have social and cultural capital to invest in a given context, not all social or cultural capital has the same

value or individuals may not have the same capacity to activate this capital within specific settings (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Lareau and Weininger (2003) noted that individuals can use their cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and competencies) to strategic advantage when they come into contact with the institutionalised standards and expectations held by schools and teachers. These skills are transmissible across generations and children can learn these skills from their parents to gain educational advantage.

The role of the school and teachers to engage parents

Regardless of parental beliefs about whether, or not, one can be effective in supporting children's learning at school, encouragement and opportunities need to be provided by teachers and schools in order for parents to make choices on their level of involvement (Feuerstein, 2001). Some schools are better than others in their abilities to engage parents (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). Teachers need to be skilled in knowing how to involve parents and the school needs leadership that values and supports high levels of parental participation. When regular invitations are made to parents to be involved then the school conveys to parents that their contributions are welcomed and valued (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The school as a system can show respect for parental concerns and suggestions. Invitations from teachers to participate in the classroom build trust that is the basis for creating a partnership around children's learning at home and at school. A school that presents as open, trusting, and inviting is conducive to building strong relationships among children and their families, as well as the school setting (Taylor et al., 2004). A school climate that is inviting is evidenced by both tangible and intangible qualities that can enhance families' and children's engagement.

Australian research findings about parental involvement in children's schooling

The analyses presented in this chapter on the nature and level of parental involvement draw on data from *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC). It is the largest research study ever conducted in Australia that explores the lives of children over time. It involves a nationally representative sample of children from across the Australian states and territories. LSAC is following two cohorts of approximately 5000 children: an Infant Cohort (birth to 1 year at Wave 1) and a Kindergarten Cohort (4-5 years at Wave 1). The research study employs a cross-sequential survey design with data collected biennially from each of the two cohorts (see Gray & Smart, 2008).

In this chapter, data collected in 2006 for the kindergarten cohort (children born between March 1999 and February 2000) is analysed. In 2006, these children were six to seven years of age and in Year 1 and Year 2 of school. The mean age of these children was 6.8 years. Descriptive information on the children and the families is presented in Table 1. The analyses use parent interview data, typically from the study child's mother, and data from the child's teacher who completed a mailed teacher questionnaire. The analyses reported use the data for the 3,374 children whose teachers completed and returned the teacher questionnaire. Children in the cohort who did not have teacher data did not differ significantly from the children included in these analyses by age, sex, whether the child spoke a language other than English at home, or had Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status, family type (most children came from two-parent families), or according to level of mothers' education.

Across the analyses reported in this chapter the socio-economic position of families is a key variable. A measure of family socio-economic position (SEP) was derived using LSAC data (Blakemore, Gibbings, & Strazdins, 2006). Analyses indicate that this summary measure is a useful tool to differentiate the experiences of children and families. The measure combines information on three elements of a family's socio-economic position (household income, parental education, and occupational prestige). Higher income allows families to access resources that are important to children's learning and wellbeing (Lynch & Kaplan, 2000), while higher levels of parental education offer benefits that are different from those provided by income (Feinstein & Sabates, 2006). Occupational prestige is based on the status ascribed to different occupations. It has been argued that occupation-based measures provide the most reliable and valid indication of overall socio-economic position (Singh-Manoux, Clarke, & Marmot, 2002). Although family income, parental education, and occupational prestige can be considered separately, these indicators are interrelated and reflect broader social and economic processes (Willms, 2003). This measure of SEP developed by Blakemore et al. (2006) provides a means through which children's experiences can be understood through the socio-demographic circumstances of their families. For these analyses, families' socio-economic position (SEP) was categorised into three groups: low (base 25% of families on the derived continuous variable); medium (50% of the families in the middle of the range); and high (25% of families with the highest values on the derived continuous variable). This categorisation is used in the following analyses to test for differences in parental expectations and involvement in children's education.

Parental expectations about their child's educational future

In the LSAC parent interview, parents responded to a single question that asked about their expectations about the level of education that they expected their child to achieve. Categories for responses were: leave before finishing secondary school; complete secondary school; complete a trade or vocational training course; go to university and complete a degree; and obtain a post-graduate qualification at a university. Responses to this question have been reported in other studies (e.g., Feuerstein, 2001; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Sy, Rowley, & Schulenberg, 2007). Most parents (99%) expected that their child would complete their secondary schooling and 41% of parents expected that their children would obtain some form of post-secondary qualification (e.g., post-graduate qualification, university degree, or vocational course). These findings reflect a valuing of the importance of their children's education.

Differences by SEP on parental responses on expectations for the level of education that their child would achieve were explored statistically using Chi-square. There were statistically significant differences between groups [χ^2 (8, 3288) = 3.77, $p < 0.000$]. Parents with higher SEP were more likely to expect that their children would obtain higher qualifications in post-secondary schooling than parents from the low SEP group.

Parents' perceptions of the responsiveness of the school to their needs

Parents responded to five questions on a scale rating the responsiveness of schools to their needs (i.e., lets you know about progress in the program or class; helps you understand what children at child's age are like; makes you aware of chances to be involved and take part in the school; gives you information and advice about how to help at home; gives you information on any community services to help you or your family; understands the needs of families from a non-English speaking or indigenous background). Parents rated these items on a 4-point scale (very well; well; just okay; not done at all). Most parents thought that schools were doing well or very well in making them aware of chances to be involved and take part in school activities (87%), as well as letting them know about their child's progress in the class (77%).

Differences in the mean item score (possible range of 1 to 4) was examined for SEP groups (low, medium, and high) using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The test of differences between SEP groups almost reached significance [F (2, 3271) = 2.94, $p = 0.053$]. Essentially, as reflected by the mean item score for SEP groups [$M_{(low)} = 2.12$; $M_{(medium)} = 2.04$; $M_{(high)} =$

2.04], there were not strong differences between groups in how responsive parents perceived schools were to their needs.

Teachers' perceptions of how involved parents were in their children's education

Teachers responded to a question that asked for their global judgement on the question: "In your opinion, how involved are this child's parents in her/his learning and education?" Teachers rated this item on a 3-point scale (very involved; somewhat involved; not involved). Teachers reported that 60% of parents were very involved in their children's education and that 37% of parents were somewhat involved.

Difference by SEP on teachers' perceptions of level of parent involvement was explored statistically using Chi-square. There were statistically significant differences between the SEP groups [χ^2 (4, 3130) = 1.50, $p < 0.000$]. Parents with higher SEP were more likely to be perceived by teachers as more involved in their child's education.

Parents' reported level of contact with their child's school

A scale with five items was used to assess parents' contact with their child's school. A number of activities in which parents may have participated at their child's school were identified to which parents could give a yes/no response. These items asked whether the parents had contacted their child's teacher; visited the child's classroom; talked to parents of other children at the school; attended a school event in which the child participated; or volunteered in the classroom or helped with a class excursion. Engagement in three or more activities was indicated by 76% of parents. Parents were most likely to have talked with other parents at the school (92%) or visited the child's classroom (87%), and least likely to have volunteered in the classroom or helped with a class excursion (48%).

Differences between SEP groups for the number of involvement of activities in which parents had engaged with the school (possible range of 0 to 5) were examined for SEP groups (low, medium, and high) using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The test of differences between SEP groups was highly significant [F (2, 3371) = 54.00, $p < 0.000$]. Mean item score for the SEP groups were $M_{(low)} = 3.43$; $M_{(medium)} = 3.83$;$M_{(high)} = 4.01$], indicating the trend that higher SEP reflected higher contact with the school.

Teachers' report of parental level of contact with the school

A scale with seven items was used to assess parents' contact with their child's school program, as reported by teachers. Parents were asked if have had participated in any of these seven activities. The response option was yes/no. These items asked whether the parents had:

spoke to, visited or wrote to the teacher; visited the child's class; attended a school event in which child participated; volunteered in their child's class or helped with a class excursion; helped elsewhere in the school, such as in the library or computer room; attended a meeting of the parent–school committee; and assisted with fund-raising. Teachers reported that 57% of parents had engaged in four or more activities. By teacher report, parents were most likely to have been in direct contact with the teacher (95%). They were least likely to have helped elsewhere in the school aside from participation in the child's classroom (16%).

Differences between SEP groups for the total number of involvement of activities in which parents had engaged with the school (possible range of 0 to 7) were examined for SEP groups (low, medium, and high) using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). The test of differences between SEP groups was highly significant [$F\ (2, 3371) = 89.98$, $p < 0.000$]. Post-hoc comparisons indicated significant differences between and across groups reflected by the mean item scores [$M_{(low)} = 3.28$; $M_{(medium)} = 4.01$; $M_{(high)} = 4.54$]. As reflected by the means presented, teachers perceived that parents from higher SEP groups were likely to engage in more activities with the school.

Summary

Large scale research studies, such as *Growing Up in Australia*, provide educational researchers with extensive opportunity to study educational processes and outcomes. In this chapter, the analyses of LSAC data explored parental expectations for their child's education and their involvement in their children's education. The analyses placed an emphasis on the social and cultural capital of families as measured by families' socio-economic position that combined household income, parental education, and parental occupational prestige. All parents held expectations that their child would complete secondary school and viewed schools as responsive to family needs. However, these parental expectations for the level of their child's future education were differentiated by the socio-economic position of families. Parents with higher socio-economic position had higher expectations for their child's future education. This trend in the data on the importance of socio-economic position to understanding parent involvement were also evident in the level of parent involvement in their child's education perceived by teachers, as well as in the level of actual contact that parents had with the school as reported by parents and teachers.

Implications for educators

In this chapter, we have considered parental involvement through ideas of social and cultural theories that are relevant to understanding children's academic socialisation. The knowledge, skills, and competence that parents can bring to bear on supporting children's learning at home and school has a basis in the norms, values, and the access to institutional resources that parents possess through their social and cultural capital (Dika & Singh, 2002). Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggested that schools' requests for parent involvement are never neutral. Requests and invitations are likely to be framed in ways that are more accessible to families with the requisite social and cultural capital. Lareau and Weininger have noted that, "As a result of their location in the stratification system, students and their parents enter the educational system with dispositional skills and knowledge that differentially facilitate or impede their ability to conform to institutionalised expectations" (p. 588). Schools must rethink the ways that they can make parents feel more confident and comfortable with involvement, and provide the activities and resources that parents require to feel empowered. Strengthening and expanding the involvement of parents in their children's education is an important means through which schools can reduce educational inequalities for children.

Reynolds and Clements (2005) propose that school programs that place a strong focus on parent involvement have the potential to yield stronger and more longer-lasting benefits for children's educational outcomes than other efforts that consume larger amounts of public educational spending (e.g., to reduce class sizes). Change in school practices require investment in the professional development of teachers to enhance their capacities to work with families. Offering involvement activities without a strong commitment to real engagement with families that can forge strong family-school partnerships is unlikely to yield increased parental participation, especially for those families that are most alienated by traditional schooling practices (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lee & Bowen, 2006). It is important to recognise that parents' educational attitudes and behaviours are important influences on children's educational outcomes. According to Pianta and Walsh (1996), child-family systems and the school system operate together to shape children's learning outcomes and their engagement with education.

Conclusion

The findings reported in this chapter reflect previous research findings in other national contexts but have previously been untested for the Australian context. Over the last twenty years, there has been increasing recognition of the role that parental involvement in schooling plays in their children's school success (see reviews by Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes,

2005). While the analyses reported here did not report on the predictive value of parental involvement to children's learning outcomes, preliminary analyses reported by Berthelsen and Walker (2008) found that higher levels of parent involvement in children's education was more predictive of children's learning competencies for language and literacy, mathematical thinking, and approaches to learning. By tracking the level and nature of parental involvement across time in *Growing Up in Australia*, it will be possible to establish the impact of parental involvement engagement on children's learning outcomes across the school years.

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Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N = 3380)

Mean Age of children	6.8 years (SD 2.6)
Sex	
Male	49%
Female	51%
School Year Level	
Year 1	68%
Year 2	32%
Child has CALD Status (child spoke a language other than English at home)	15%
Child has ATSI Status (child is Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander)	3.6%
Family Type	
Two-parent family	88%
Single parent	12%
Mother's Education	
Did not complete Secondary School	16%
Completed Secondary School	20%
Post-secondary qualification	64%